

All I'll Ever Know by lucdarling

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Angst and Feels, Big Brothers, Childhood, Childhood Trauma, Gen, Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence, Neil Hargrove's A+ Parenting, POV Billy Hargrove, Pre-Canon, Slice of Life, Step-siblings, no beta we die like bob newby

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Neil Hargrove, Susan Hargrove

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Billy Hargrove & Susan Hargrove

Status: Completed

Published: 2021-07-30

Updated: 2021-07-30

Packaged: 2022-03-31 10:20:54

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 1,600

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Billy clutches the pillow against his head. He wonders what will be broken when he leaves his room in the morning.

"Are you awake?"

"I am now, pipsqueak." He tosses his pillow under his head and raises an arm to block the hallway's light from falling into his eyes. "C'mon in, unless you want my dad to yell at you."

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Author's Note:

Something short and quick that hit me last night and I wrote half of this instead of sleeping. Then I was "late" to work this morning to continue writing. Ah, the life of a fic writer and work-from-home protocols. Title from the eponymous song by OWEL, since it's playing as I stare at Post New Work and wrack my brain for something.

I could probably write more about pre-Hawkins Billy & Max, if there was interest. If you liked this, pretty please let me know by hitting the comment button!

Billy has pulled his pillow over his head in a futile attempt to block the sounds from the living room out. It's not much use, the walls are paper-thin. Billy knows that well, he'd put his fist through the wall next to his closet door only two weeks ago.

The sounds are all too familiar, his dad shouting and a woman responding. His mom and, it seems, his new step-mom (Billy will never call Susan that, not even if she asks.) like to answer back even though it makes his dad yell louder. Mean things, words that Billy isn't allowed to use.

He clutches the pillow tighter against his head and wonders what will be broken when he leaves his room in the morning.

There's a light on his wall when he next blinks, the one by his head. It's not the wall that lights up when cars drive past with their too-bright headlights.

Billy turns over in his bed, squinting. There's a dark shape in the hallway, hand still clutching on the doorknob. The other one is in Maxine's mouth like she's six and not just-turned ten years old.

"Are you awake?"

"I am now, pipsqueak." He tosses his pillow under his head and raises an arm to block the yellow light from falling onto his face. "C'mon in, unless you want my dad to yell at you."

Maxine shakes her head, red braids twisting with the movement. She hurries in, carefully pushing the door shut until it catches.

His dad shouts and Maxine's mom screams back. Billy is used to this, too.

Something shatters. Billy thinks it was one of the picture frames over the mantle. He hopes it wasn't a plate.

Maxine dives for his bed and Billy sighs. He stares at the ceiling, eyes readjusting to the darkness of his bedroom as ninety-some pounds of girl and bony elbows make themselves comfortable.

"Hush now," Billy says as her cold feet press against his shins. He flicks her ear, chuckling when she muffles her yelp. "It'll be over soon. Just close your eyes."

He ignores the trembling next to him and sighs, wishing he had a cigarette. He's only started recently, an effort to look cool to the high school guys he'll be sharing the hallways with next year. It calms him down, is the thing. It doesn't taste good but the ritual, Billy likes that.

Maxine finally slumps against him, breathing evenly if a little clogged. Billy turns on his side and keeps an eye on the door.

The noises have stopped outside his bedroom, punctuated with the door to the garage squeaking and slamming as his dad leaves the house.

Light falls on his face again and Billy grunts in annoyance.

"Oh, there she is." Susan says softly. She sounds like a mom, fond and amused at finding her daughter in the bed of a teenage boy she's known a few months. "Thank you, Billy."

"You want me to wake her up?" Billy's arm hovers over the small shoulder pressed against his chest. Maxine's nightshirt is dark blue in the hallway light. Billy had thought it was black. He isn't sure why it

matters.

"She won't get back to sleep if I make her move." Susan answers and now she sounds like Billy's used to. The undercurrent of worry that dogs every word out of her mouth, the fretting that accompanies the twists of her hands.

"Fine," Billy says and lays his head back down again. "Close the door then."

Susan does as she's told. She doesn't slam the door behind her, not like his dad would. Billy tells himself he doesn't feel bad about his tone, that she shut the door so quietly because her daughter is asleep.

Maxine lets out a snore, then another. Billy jostles her, waits until she clearly wakes up and shifts. Her feet still end up against his shins.

He falls asleep before his dad comes home.

Morning comes, like it always does. Billy slides out from between Maxine and the wall, wanders out into the living room towards the kitchen.

Susan sits at the kitchen table, hands wrapped around a mug of coffee.

His dad is nowhere to be seen.

"Watch your step," Susan tells him as Billy reaches for the cereal and a bowl. "I think I swept up everything but there could be shards somewhere. I'll vacuum once you kids are out the door."

"What was it?"

"What was what?" Susan sounds confused. Billy pours milk over his cereal, puts the jug back in the fridge and kicks the door shut.

"What. broke." Billy enunciates, looking Susan in the eye.

"Oh." She says. Her hands wrap tighter around the steaming mug. "I hoped you hadn't heard that."

Billy eats his cereal, waiting for an answer. He tries to lift his eyebrow at her, isn't sure he succeeds. It's a work in progress and he can only spend so long practicing in the mirror before his dad swears at him not to be a pansy.

"An ashtray," Susan finally speaks after swallowing half her coffee. "It was on the side table," she lifts a hand to point, like Billy hasn't lived in this trailer half his life. Susan and her daughter are the new things, still learning where everything gets stored and how to walk past one another in a hallway that's eight steps long and barely the width of two people.

Billy doesn't tell Susan he made it in art class for his mom and had carved an approximation of a flower into the base of it with a shaky hand over two class periods before it went into the kiln. His hand rises up to touch his pendant, the one thing he still has of hers that his dad is never going to get rid of.

"Right," he says instead. "I need to get ready for school."

"I'll wake Maxine up."

"Don't bother." Billy dumps his empty bowl in the sink. "I don't want you in my room." Susan sits back down at the table as he storms past.

He shuts the bedroom door quietly even though he wants to slam it. Maxine sleeps on and Billy envies her, just for a moment.

Billy thinks she needs sleep after everything that went down last night since she's still a little kid. It was tame, by his standards but she had looked terrified for a second before closing his door. He's used to the restless nights, the stolen snatches of sleep in between yelling or trying to get comfortable on bruised skin. Maxine will get used to it, too.

He gets dressed behind his closet door, cheeks pink and he checks on her after each article of clothing is put on. It's only with his shoes on that he can kick the end of his bed.

It shakes and rattles, a horrendous noise that Billy only thinks better of once it's hanging in the air. He hopes his dad isn't home, fingers

crossed at his sides as Maxine stirs.

Maxine sits upright. "I'm up!"

Billy pulls the covers down towards him. "Yeah you are. Now get dressed for school, squirt."

"Don't call me that!" She crosses her arms but it's hard to look fierce with a pillow mark on her freckled cheek. Billy laughs, she pouts and he laughs some more.

"School. Clothes. Breakfast. Bus." Billy orders her, pointing at the door. "Get out of my room."

Maxine jumps out of his bed like he had threatened to cut her hair. She pauses at the door, looking at him as he yanks his covers back up towards his pillows.

"Is it," she stops, hand on the doorknob just like last night. "It's okay?"

Billy sits on his newly made bed. "Yeah, Maxine." He ignores her protest at the use of her name, like always. "Go get ready for school or you'll miss the bus and you can walk." Susan might drive her, but she'll be more motivated if she thinks she has to walk.

She flees his bedroom and Billy lays back down on his bed for a breath or three. The water stain on the ceiling is still there, dark around the edges. If he had a Polaroid, Billy might think about capturing the image and note its growth. He scowls instead.

He can hear Maxine stumbling around, drawers slamming shut and the creak of her closet door. She's in the bedroom that used to be his playroom and where his mom practiced yoga.

She screams down the hallway, "Mom, can you do my hair? We're gonna be late!"

Billy considers pulling the pillow over his head to block out the sound. He picks up his watch from the milk crate that acts as a nightstand. They have twenty minutes until the bus comes to their stop down the street and it's a six minute walk from the backdoor. He knows it will take Susan the maximum amount of time they have to

do her daughter's hair since Maxine hates standing still.

Finally, they're out the door. Billy has money in his pocket for lunch but Maxine clutches a bright blue bag, something with velcro and zippers. They have to run for the bus, seeing the other school children already lined up to board.

"Bring that home with you," Billy reminds her as they come to a stop at the end of the line.

Maxine rolls her eyes and Billy shoves her forward toward the stairs. He never wanted to be a big brother, and wouldn't have chosen this but sometimes, it's kind of okay.